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## **Coming Together: The Final Report on CHRA's Research into the Merits and Feasibility of Establishing an Atlantic Canadian Network of Affordable Housing Providers and Advocates**

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## **Introduction**

The idea of developing some sort of network of affordable housing interests in Atlantic Canada came from comments made at the conclusion of a policy workshop that the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) held in Saint John, New Brunswick, in September 2003.

Central to CHRA's capacity building mandate is the facilitation of networking and the exchange of ideas and information among affordable housing groups and professionals from across Canada. Clearly, in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec where strong provincial non-profit housing associations exist, networking is relatively frequent, and information about housing management and development is more readily available.

New Brunswick has a provincial non-profit housing association that holds an annual conference and serves its members well given its limited resources. Likewise, Nova Scotia has recently scaled up the activity level of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia. Still, neither Newfoundland and Labrador nor Prince Edward Island have comparable associations. Also, neither of the two existing associations as yet have the resources to provide a level of networking, advocacy and capacity building support achieved by the larger housing associations.

Could a regional network enhance the existing supports available to Atlantic Canadian housing organizations? Could it strengthen the region's advocacy efforts by expanding the number of individuals and groups speaking with one voice to housing issues? Could it create the critical mass required to attract the resources needed to support the delivery of information and capacity building supports comparable to those available in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia? Could it support the development of more needed affordable housing units in Atlantic Canada? Given the local interest in developing a network, CHRA decided that the answers to these questions were worth pursuing.

## **Consultation**

On November 19, 2003 four participants (one from each of the four Atlantic provinces) from the Saint John workshop where the network idea was raised, and CHRA's capacity building Coordinator, held a teleconference to discuss the network concept.

The group decided that it would be useful to find out from as many Atlantic Canadian affordable housing developers and advocates as possible whether they saw a role for a network, what that role might be, and how the network might be pulled together and supported in order to fulfill that role. CHRA agreed to undertake that research, and Atlantic Canadian consultants were contracted to administer surveys, and to conduct interviews with housing developers and advocates to gather the information needed to evaluate whether and how to move forward with the establishment of the network. 59 of the 143 surveys distributed were returned, for a respectable return rate of 41%. A total of forty interviews were conducted in the four provinces.

The final reports on the research conducted in each of the four provinces is available on CHRA's website at [www.chra-achru.ca](http://www.chra-achru.ca). They are stand-alone documents, complete with statistical analysis and the identification of major themes that the respondents in the particular provinces put forward. This report provides a brief synopsis of these results on a regional basis.

The group also decided that it would host a consultation meeting in Halifax on December 10, as representatives from many of the target groups would be gathering there for a meeting hosted by CMHC on December 11. This meeting was attended by approximately 35 individuals, and the flipchart notes are transcribed verbatim and attached in appendix 1.

## Research Results

A synopsis of the interview, survey and Halifax consultation research results are presented below. Far too many unique ideas were presented by the research participants to list them all in this summary. However, an attempt is made in the individual provincial reports to be comprehensive. All responses are given in the individual reports while only the more common responses are highlighted here.

### The Research Participants

Each of the researchers consulted housing sector participants throughout their provinces, though the relatively high level of affordable housing activity in urban areas meant that the research focus had an urban bias.

82% of respondents came from the non-profit/co-op sector, 10% from the three levels of government, 5% from the private sector, 2% from universities and 1% unknown (not disclosed). Among the non-profit sector respondents, the largest segment comes from the community-based housing sector, though significant numbers of respondents come from other community service organizations with an interest in housing like shelter organizations, community health centres, youth services organizations and women's organizations.

### Existing Networking Activities

Interview respondents were asked to describe their current networking activities. 80% of respondents indicated that they network regularly with organizations within their province, while 23% indicated that they regularly extend that networking to other Atlantic Provinces. Only 5% indicated that their networking within their province was occasional, while 51% of respondents indicated that their networking with colleagues in neighbouring provinces is occasional. 15% of respondents indicated that they do not network within their province, while 26% indicate that they do not network outside their province.

One suggestion made by these findings is that the respondents value networking as an important business practice. This suggestion is confirmed by the respondents, but with certain conditions. Networking is seen as valuable if there is a "real reason" to do so, if the information shared and discussed is relevant to the participants' work, if real learning and/or action takes place, and if the networking respects people's extreme time constraints.

Within the provinces existing associations like the New Brunswick Non-profit Housing Association, the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, Community Action on Homelessness (CAH) in Halifax and the St. John's Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness were identified as key and valuable agencies that facilitate networking. Within the Atlantic region the facilitating agents were far fewer, and less focused on this activity. This is reflected in the relatively low percentage of respondents that regularly network with colleagues in other Atlantic Provinces. The regional networking facilitators, including Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), and CHRA, do not regularly provide networking opportunities, but clearly when the opportunities are there a substantial number of respondents participate, or would like to participate in them.

The large majority of respondents see value in an expansion of the networking opportunities. They want more networking that is strategic in selecting topics that are most important to the region, that focuses more on the development of new units, and that provides more information sharing opportunities. Some are concerned about the financial barriers to bringing people together face-to-face, and some want to focus on developing more networking opportunities within the province.

Many P.E.I respondents indicated that existing networking opportunities meet their current needs, but several of them indicated that they are anxious to develop more housing and that if networking opportunities focused on development they would wish to participate. In Nova Scotia

a few respondents indicated that that current networking opportunities meet and exceed their needs, and that all the necessary knowledge exists within Nova Scotia. These reservations were virtually absent in New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

#### Network Mandate

All research participants were asked what activities the network should undertake. 77% want advocacy to be the focus (including engaging in dialogue with government), 43% want to focus on bringing people together to talk about housing issues and ideas, and 30% would focus on each of information sharing, training and the provision of learning opportunities, and the sharing of housing news.

The in-depth interviews and the Halifax consultation widely reinforced these selections, but also suggested that public education, housing needs research, and the development of a member directory to facilitate more communications are important.

***Several respondents suggested that ultimately developing more housing units is the best yardstick for the network's success and worth.***

A number of respondents also emphasized that the network's mandate must be strong, clear, and relevant to the network's members.

#### Organizational Structure

To the question of what organizational structure the network should adopt, it was common that respondents expressed some uncertainty, stating that the structure needs to support the organization's mandate. Some respondents suggested that the organization should start informally and consider incorporation when it is well established. Among the survey respondents 17.5% either did not choose any option or elected for more than one option depending on the chosen mandate.

Among the respondents that did demonstrate a preference the numbers were identical, with 27.5% of respondents choosing each of the other options- namely becoming an informal group, an incorporated association or an affiliate of a larger association.

Respondents were also asked who they felt should be targeted for participation in the network. Respondents were given the opportunity to select as many groups as they wished, so the percentage totals represent the number of participants who selected each one. In descending order, the selections were:

85%	Affordable Housing Providers
76%	Housing Advocacy Groups
68%	Government
59%	Housing Related Service Providers
56%	Other Social Service and Social Development Groups
47%	Private Developers
42%	Economic Development Groups
24%	Academics

The majority of respondents indicated that they felt that attracting a broad membership would be an asset for the network. Assets were seen to include gaining better knowledge about the full spectrum of housing issues and innovations, generating broader interest in affordable housing, and raising more membership revenue. The point was made that no matter how broad the membership became, the focus should remain on affordable housing.

A substantial minority, including a majority of Prince Edward Island respondents, cautioned that targeting membership too broadly could be a detriment. The network would require more resources, it would likely not be able to be relevant to all groups, it might bog down in generalities

and not be able to focus and move priority initiatives forward. Some groups were not seen as substantially relevant to the affordable housing sector.

Survey respondents were asked whether there were any existing organizations that might serve as a good model for the Atlantic Network. The New Brunswick Non-Profit Housing Association and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) community planning groups, the Mental Health Consumer Network, the Community Health Promotion Network, CHRA, the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada (CHFC), the Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, and the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation were among the suggestions, though none were selected repeatedly.

#### Participation

45% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they would become active and interested members of the network, while 41% indicated that they might become members should the network meet their needs. 14% of respondents ruled out their participation.

When asked if, theoretically, they would be willing to pay a “modest annual membership fee” to take part in the network 49% of respondents said “yes” and 11% said “maybe”. 34% of respondents indicated that they would not pay, while 6% did not respond to this question.

The willingness to pay is lower than the overall interest in participating in the network, but this is not surprising given the extremely tight budget constraints under which many affordable housing and other social sector associations currently operate. This was specifically identified as the key factor in many respondents’ decision to indicate unwillingness to pay.

When asked in the interviews what would encourage respondents to participate in the network, clear goals and a meaningful exchange of useful, practical information were seen as key. Other attractants include a focus on the development of new housing, a focus on helping end users most in need, simplicity of involvement and minimizing demands on members’ effort and time, good organization, adequate resources (for the network), focused effort, and financial support for participation were identified as key.

Key deterrents include a lack of well defined purpose (given that local networking opportunities exist), lack of time and financial resources, lack of action or progress toward goals, a failure to build on existing work and resources, and a failure to include aboriginal issues.

Survey respondents were asked how the network members should communicate with one another- by e-mail and website, by teleconference, or through face-to-face meetings. 61% of respondents suggested the use of e-mail- and website-based communications, 59% advocated for face-to-face meetings, 27% would use teleconferences and 3% selected an “other” or no response. The comments suggested that communications should employ a mix of face-to-face and e-mail and/or teleconferences. Some advocated for a face-to-face network kick-off meeting, while many suggested that there should be, at minimum, an annual face-to-face.

#### Resources

Respondent’s willingness to pay a modest membership fee to the organization was outlined above. In any event, membership fees alone rarely fully support an organization’s resource needs. Other means of supporting the activities of the network with adequate resources to fulfill its goals will have to be identified. Many suggestions were made regarding potential financing sources, including fundraising, getting corporate sponsorship, establishing a foundation, charging a fee for services, and forging strategic partnerships. Overwhelmingly, the most consistent and common responses charged governments with the responsibility for supporting this network. CMHC was the most commonly cited source, but Human Resources and Social Development (tied to the SCPI program) was also suggested several times. Health Canada, the Atlantic

Canada Opportunities Agency, provincial and municipal governments were all seen as having potential roles in supporting the network.

## **Conclusion**

This research drew on the experience and insight of approximately 135 non-profit, public sector and private sector participants who do work from the core to the periphery of the affordable housing sector. The generosity, frankness and honesty with which the respondents shared their perspectives on the network concept, both positive and negative, was greatly appreciated by the network's research and planning group.

Indeed, there were respondents who questioned the need for a regional network, citing the existing networking opportunities as adequate. On the whole, however, there was a broad base of support for moving forward with a network of some sort. Inevitably, those with an interest in the network will drive its success and will have to address its challenges and shortcomings.

Moving forward, the next step is to establish a planning committee who will have a strong information base upon which to shape the organization's structure, operational model and mandate. The planning group will take the research results and attempt to develop a brief plan to launch the network. The plan will include a rationale for each critical decision. That plan will be circulated to all research participants for their information and feedback.

# Appendix 1

Meeting Report: A Consultation to assess the Merits and Feasibility of Establishing an Atlantic Canadian Network of Affordable Housing Providers and Advocates

**December 10, 2003**

6:00-9:30 P.M.

Prince George Hotel

Halifax, NS

Moderator: Geoffrey Gillard, Capacity Building Coordinator, Canadian Housing and Renewal Association

Recorders: Angela Bishop, Vice President, Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia  
Bruce Pearce, Consultant, Newfoundland and Labrador

## **Introduction**

The meeting was convened by CHRA, in partnership with the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia to assess the views of some core, and many non-core, affordable housing stakeholders in Atlantic Canada regarding the establishment of a regional affordable housing network. Approximately 35 people attended the meeting, with representation from all four Atlantic Provinces. The meeting preceded a CMHC workshop to be held on December 11, and regional CMHC staff were instrumental in getting information about the meeting out to its workshop participants.

Throughout December researchers in each of the 4 Atlantic Provinces were conducting interview and survey research into Atlantic Canadian housing stakeholders' views on the development of a regional network, and each of the researchers presented interim findings at the meeting. The remainder of the meeting was given over to gathering the attendees' views on five questions that had been developed jointly by CHRA and the researchers. Participants discussed each question in a small group and then presented their ideas to the plenary.

The flipchart record includes all of the points that were presented to the plenary. Participants were also given the option of submitting their views in written format, and the input of the 4 individuals that chose to submit ideas this way is captured in the Submissions sections below.

## **Some Major Themes**

### Where is the idea coming from/who's driving it?

There was clearly interest in where the idea to establish an Atlantic Canadian network of affordable housing providers and advocates has come from. There was concern that this initiative might be driven from interests from outside the region (ie. CHRA), whereas the region's housing groups must direct such an initiative for it to be seen as legitimate and relevant.

It was made clear that the impetus for this initiative came from Atlantic Canadians, and that CHRA is acting in the initiative's early stages as a facilitator and a support. Careful consideration must be given to CHRA's future role in the network.

### The network's function needs to be clear before designing its structure

Given that resources for this consultation process are limited, an attempt was made to get some feedback on issues like a potential network structure before all of the information on which a real decision on that issue would be based are established. Certainly the structure will be based on a number of factors, including the network's function, resources, interest/membership level, goals, etc.

In answering the "structure" question there were two main camps- those advocating for a loose, informal association that would support networking and information transfer, with possibly one annual face-to-face meeting, and those recommending that a formal organization be created with paid staff to strengthen its sector support and advocacy roles.

### Key Roles or mandate for the network

This for many participants was the key issue on which most other questions, including the network's structure, activities and resourcing, hung. There were strong advocates for the creation of a network that focused either on facilitating networking and collaboration among members or on advocating to, and influencing the thinking of policy makers. As stated above, the networking role was associated with an informal organizational structure which might be easier to initiate than the more formal structure that might be required to take on a meaningful policy role.

Some members also suggested that the organization should promote awareness raising about key housing issues among members and the public, coordinate education opportunities for

members, and otherwise undertake efforts to build the skills and capacity of members to respond to the region's housing needs.

### Resourcing the Network

This was generally recognized as one of the key challenges facing the network. A number of participants felt strongly that CMHC should be the principle financial supporter. ACOA was also put forward as a logical financing source. Having government as a key supporter was recognized as a major challenge should the network choose to take on an advocacy focus given that governments tend to avoid financially supporting this activity.

A number of other ideas were identified, including membership fees, the purchase of services from the network, and a municipal levy on developer-built housing. This is clearly an area that will likely be multi-pronged and one that will require detailed research.

### Network Membership

A long list of potential members was developed, but there was strong support for starting by targeting housing providers and advocates. Academics were identified consistently as a relatively low-priority group to draw in. Identifying the target group(s) will influence most other decisions, including the network's focus.

## **Meeting Notes Transcription**

### **Question 1: What purpose would a network serve, and what activities would it undertake?**

#### *Flipchart notes*

- A registry- who's who rather than a network
  - Something to facilitate matching organizations
- Create a housing policy that's "housing friendly"
- Educate/lobby/advocate to policy makers
- Awareness-raising and outreach (engage new people)
- Good for advocacy and lobbying
- Strength in numbers
- Policy-making forum

#### *Submissions*

- Awareness-raising
- Ideas bank
- Individual level sharing
- Partnership coordinating voice
- Lobby
- Strength in numbers
- Lobbying and advocacy
- Tool for sharing as well as lobbying and advocating.
- Policy
- Educating

### **Question 2: How would the network be structured and how would it function?**

#### *Flipchart notes*

- Are we at the stage where we agree with the idea of establishing a network?
- Need to more clearly address what the network would do in order to determine structure (form follows function)
- Discussion group- e-mail and meet once a year at first
- Formal organization with staff and resources
- Must be nationally funded

- Need paid positions to make links and to build capacity in the sector
- Share events
- Should be formal

#### *Submissions*

- Formal staff resources
- Nationally funded (resources)
- Loose, but incorporated (mission, vision)
- Share info
- Build capacity
- Web forums
- Discussion pages
- Live chats
- Maritime Life- shared experiences
- Mentoring program
- Formal organization-staff resources necessary
- Need to clearly address what it would actually do/mean

#### **Question 3: How will the network be resourced? Are there any sources that we have not thought of yet?**

#### *Flipchart notes*

- CMHC
- Municipal levy for developers- make a contribution to affordable housing and the network
- Membership fees
- Pay per use/purchase of services from network
- ACOA/economic development housing as job/business creation
- Fundraising
- Payback from new government programs
- CHRA and AHANS and NB- leverage work together to get funding from all three
- Government will not pay people to advocate against them
  - Needs to e a long term goal and develop how to sustain it in long term (eg.foundation)
- Partnership-community or economic development (eg. land transfer tax and other ideas(also support building)
- CMHC-housing forum
  - Need something similar if has capacity to bring issue forward
- Advocacy does not have to be sole role
  - it would help advocates
  - needs to be an honest broker

#### *Submissions*

- Get commitment from government to commit to funds 3-5 years (long term sustainable)so that working capital can move forward ideas
  - Refer to Nova Scotia Tourism/Industry Partnership
  - Structure+staff+mandate= powerful positivity
- Fundraising- group-oriented
- PR- business development
- Image driven
- Community based
- Tax levy
- CMHC
- Partnership opportunities
- Membership fees

**Question 4: Who will be members of the network and what will they bring to and get from it?**

*Flipchart notes*

- Home builders
- Planners/developers
- Start with the core group that really wants this to happen- then expand
- Faith groups
- Lenders/financial institutions
- Non profit housing providers
- Clients/consumers
- Open/broad-based membership
- Bring community engagement and broader context
- Health and social workers
- Justice
- Shelters and halfway homes

What would they bring?

- Identification of strategic opportunities
- Best practices to share
- New ideas and expertise

*Submissions*

- Volunteers of those faced with challenges
- (to get from it)- continual grant status
- someone on all levels of government
- banks
- private developers
- non profit housing providers
- clients
- home builders associations
- They will get:
  - New ideas
  - Sharing of info
  - Best practices
  - Identification of strategic opportunities
- Cooperatives
  - International examples
- Existing provincial housing associations
- private sector
- Canadian Manufactured Housing Association
- Urban development groups

**Question 5: Can you identify any other key issues that must be addressed as part of establishing the network?**

*Flipchart notes*

- Turf protection
- Power differentials
- Democratic legitimacy
- Diversity
- Geography and costs of face to face meetings

- Multi-jurisdictional/multi-legislative issues differ from province to province
- Wide network losing focus
  - Keep focused and simple
- Know-how to start at local level
- Busy agenda
  - 2 days once a year
  - rotate between provinces
- explore best practices for network models (regional, national, international)
- be clear that people are looking for networking opportunities (v. just being part of a network)
- willingness to engage in/help lead network?
- Who will lead establishment and maintenance of the network?
- Networking opportunities are different from a network
- Where did this idea come from and how will it go to the next step?
- Who, who, who?
- With money, there are opportunities to come up with better ways to use the money
- Community acceptance
- Lobby to get money
- Sustainability (eg SCPI)

*Submissions*

- Leadership
- Cost geographically